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EARLY COMMENTS ON MILTON’S ANTI-TRINITARIANISM

Vladimir Brljak

Comments on Milton’s anti-Trinitarianism predating the discovery of *The Christian Doctrine* were an important factor in dismantling once influential claims about the supposedly orthodox representation of the deity in *Paradise Lost*. Although Milton’s views no longer need defending, when exactly his anti-Trinitarianism first came to be recognized, and what reactions it occasioned, remain important questions in the reception history of his work. For a long time, the earliest known comment on the subject was that in Charles Leslie’s *History of Sin and Heresie Attempted* (1698), followed by remarks by Dennis, Defoe, the Richardsons, and others. More recently, however, two manuscript comments have surfaced that have not yet been adequately dated and examined.

William Poole made a valuable addition to the store of early commentary on Milton’s work by bringing to light a number of references to Milton in the commonplace books of Abraham Hill, including the following entry on *Paradise Lost* and *The Art of Logic*:

Milton makes the cause of the Angels revolt to be when God declar Christ to be his son but it would have bin more poetical & more true that there revolt was upon the incarnation of Christ declared to them & so the humane nature preferd before the angelica[l] to their great discontent, Discours Pride the cause of heresy Milton a Socinian Logic. 132 Iohn 17. 3[.] (Sloane MS 2894 fol. 70v)¹

Hill’s entry is of interest for several reasons, and his implied comparison between *Paradise Lost* and *The Art of Logic* is rightly described by Poole as “a rather remarkable example ... of an early-modern author reacting not just to one text, but to the intellectual coherency of an author’s larger project, even across major generic division within an oeuvre” (“Two Early Readers” 90). However, Poole’s tentative dating of the entry must be discarded, as must his explication of its condensed ending.²

The lower limit for the dating of this entry can be firmly fixed to 1698, as the bulk of it is demonstrably derived from Leslie's *History*. I quote the relevant passage at length, underlining specific verbal parallels with Hill's entry:

[Milton] makes the Cause of the Revolt of *Lucifer* and his *Angels* to have been, that *God*, upon a certain Day in *Heaven*, before the *Creation* of this Lower World, did Summon All the *Angels* to Attend, and then Declar'd His *Son* to be their *Lord* and *King*; and Applies to that Day the 7th. verse of the Second *Psalms*, *Thou art my Son, this Day have I Begotten Thee*. The Folly of this Contrivance appears many ways. To make the *Angels* Ignorant of the B. *Trinity*; And to take it ill to Acknowledge Him for their *King*, whom they had always Ador'd as their *God*; or as if the *Son* had not been their *King*, or had not been *Begotten* till that Day. This Scheme of the *Angels* Revolt cannot Answer either to the *Eternal Generation* of the *Son*, which was before the *Angels* had a Being, or to His *Temporal Generation* of the B. *Virgin*, that being long after the *Fall* of the *Angels*.

But if Mr. *Milton* had made the Cause of their Discontent to have been the Incarnation of *Christ*, then, at that time, Reveal'd to the *Angels*; And their Contesting, in such Manner as hereafter told, for the Dignity of the Angelical above that of the Humane Nature, his Contexture had been Nearer to the Truth, and might have been much more Poetical. . . . (sig. A2v-A3r)

Clearly Hill's entry is a summary of this more extensive statement by Leslie.³ The words "Discours Pride the cause of heresy" are Hill's reference to Leslie's *History*, a descriptive title summarizing the work's principal thesis.⁴ This is confirmed by another extract from the *History*, appearing on the following page of the manuscript: "It is not said in Scripture that the Divels knew Christ to be God tho they call him the Son of God the holy one of God & adjured him by God Discours Pride &c." (Sloane MS 2894 fol. 71r).⁵ Leslie published anonymously until the late 1700s, which presumably explains why Hill does not give his name here, but it remains unclear why these extracts appear without page references and under a descriptive rather than the actual title.⁶

The final words of the entry—"Milton a Socinian Logic. 132 Iohn 17. 3"—are a reference, not found in Leslie, to Milton's *Artis Logicae*, in its original edition of 1672, which contains, on page 132 (sig. G6v), an openly anti-Trinitarian, hence "Socinian," comment relating to John 17.3: "And this is life eternall, that they might know thee the onely true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent."⁷ "Indeed," Milton writes,

I should consider as more important than these primary modals those secondary ones, as they are called, by which enunciations are commonly divided into *exclusives*, ... *exceptives*, ... and *restrictives* And an exclusive is such either in its subject or in its predicate; in its subject when, by a prefixed exclusive sign, it excludes all other subjects from the predicate. But reason would dictate this rule in vain if it is permitted to certain modern logicians, and particularly to Keckermann, suddenly to destroy it by a rule invented for this purpose. “An exclusive,” he says, “does not exclude the concomitants of the subject, as in *The Father alone is true God*. Here,” he says, “there is not excluded the concomitant, namely, the Son and the Holy Spirit.” But who does not see that this rule is intended to ridicule that perfectly clear text in John 17.3?
(CPW 8: 330)

The verse was closely connected to Socinian anti-Trinitarianism both by its advocates and its opponents,⁸ and as Hill correctly surmised, Milton joined the former in accepting it as evidence of the non-identity of the Father and the Son, a doctrine that surfaces elsewhere in *The Art of Logic*, and is of course argued at length in the chapter on the Son in *The Christian Doctrine*, where the same verse appears among the proof-texts (CPW 6: 215, 248; 8: 233). Hill is thus the first reader on record to take note of the theological subtext of *The Art of Logic*, which would apparently evade Milton studies until the controversies occasioned by the discovery of *The Christian Doctrine*.⁹ While the label “Socinian” is certainly not meant positively, it was not necessarily as negative in Hill’s eyes as it was in Leslie’s, especially given Hill’s connections to such figures as Francis Lodwick, who leaned strongly toward the anti-Trinitarian position, or John Tillotson, who denounced Socinianism in defending himself from Leslie’s charges, but maintained a respectful and tolerant attitude toward its adherents.¹⁰ There is also nothing in Hill’s entry to indicate that he shared any of Leslie’s other objections to *Paradise Lost*.

Another early comment on the anti-Trinitarian element in *Paradise Lost* has been uncovered by Joad Raymond (210), who discusses it very briefly and makes no attempt at its dating. The comment appears in a marginal entry found in a copy of the first edition of the poem now in the Cambridge University Library, entered against the same passage (5.600-15) to which Leslie objected: “this acco ... of X^{ts} birth ... [?] seems to bo ... on prophan ... e ... & destroy ... coæternity.”¹¹ Although found in a copy of the first edition, this comment shows the influence of, and thus post-dates, John Dennis’s *Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704). Two details in Dennis’s treatise are relevant: his well-known comment on the anti-Trinitarian nature of a different passage in *Paradise Lost* (3.383-96)—described as “very

Lofty and Elevated,” although “a little tainted with Socinianism, for by the first Verse ’tis evident, that he [Milton] look’ t upon the Son of God as a Created Being” (sig. D2r-v)—and his parallel between lines 1.105-11 and Tasso’s *Jerusalem Delivered* 4.15 (sig. F1r-F2r). Going back to the Cambridge copy, only three substantial annotations are found in it: the one quoted above (sig. S1r); one, apparently in a different hand, pointing to a parallel between 1.70-75 and the *Aeneid* 6.577-79 (sig. A2r), obviously derived from Hume, who quotes the same lines in the exact same format; and one, apparently in the same hand as the comment on anti-Trinitarianism, pointing to precisely the same parallel in Tasso adduced by Dennis (sig. A2v).¹² Thus either the author of the Cambridge marginalia independently arrived at the same parallel from Tasso as Dennis, and also made a similar comment on Milton’s anti-Trinitarianism, or, as seems far more likely, he copied the Tasso parallel from Dennis and noticed the anti-Trinitarian basis of 5.600-15 under the influence of Dennis’s comment on 3.383-96 (and possibly Leslie’s as well, also on 5.600-15). In all probability, then, the comment on anti-Trinitarianism in the Cambridge copy post-dates Dennis’s treatise of 1704.

The earliest known comment on Milton’s anti-Trinitarianism thus remains Leslie’s, a full generation after the first edition of *Paradise Lost*. One explanation of this might be that earlier comments have not survived or are yet to be uncovered. Another possibility, not necessarily exclusive of the former, is the one suggested by Rumrich (77-79), namely that this aspect of Milton’s work became more visible to readers who, like Leslie and Hill, read it against the background of the intense “Trinitarian Controversy” emerging in the late 1680s and lasting throughout and beyond the 1690s. Besides Dennis’s explicit remark, a link between Milton and Socinianism was implied, as Lieb notes (249-50), in Toland’s *Life* of 1698. In this respect it is interesting that although Leslie is embroiled in anti-Socinian controversy, and elsewhere in his *History* denounces the teachings of “*Arius* and his Bastard *Socinus*”—“Generals of the greatest Name” in a whole army of anti-Trinitarian heretics: Apollinarians, Cerdonites, Ebionites, Eunomians, Eutychians, Familists, Macedonians, Manicheans, Marcionites, Muslims, Nestorians, Quakers, Saturnians, Theopaschites, Unitarians (*History* sig. D1r-v)—he does not use these or any other terms in reference to Milton, and even seems to imply that Milton was merely inadvertently, rather than consciously, heterodox. The impression is that Leslie was perfectly aware of the conscious nature of Milton’s heterodoxy, but did not want to furnish his opponents with so distinguished an ally.

Finally, a methodical examination of Abraham Hill's notebooks is likely to yield more entries on Milton. My own browsing turns up six that are not mentioned by Poole, three of which on works not previously noted as known to Hill: two extracts from *Hirelings* (Sloane MS 2893 fol. 45v; 2894 fol. 108v), of early church examples against the public maintenance of the clergy, and a reference, among a series of entries on the subject of rebaptism, to *A Brief History of Moscovia* (2894 fol. 99r).¹³ There is also another extract from *Civil Power* (2894 fol. 95r), and references to the *First Defence* (2897 fol. 76r) and *The History of Britain* (2897 fol. 32v).¹⁴ A comprehensive study, systematically collecting and analyzing all of Hill's references to Milton, would be an important contribution to the scholarship on the early reception of Milton's work.

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Notes

¹ The biblical reference appears to be underlined, although slight damage to the bottom edge of the page makes this difficult to confirm. In addition to this entry, Poole notes references to *Lycidas*, the *First* and *Second Defences*, *A Treatise of Civil Power*, *The History of Britain*, and *Of True Religion*; a record of two comments on Milton's blindness, one attributed to Milton himself, the other to an unnamed contemporary; and entries for several of Milton's works in two of the book lists in Sloane MS 2893 fols. 149r-218v, one of which "appears to be a partial catalogue of Hill's ... library" ("Two Early Readers" 89-90). The entry on Hill in Shawcross's *Bibliography* reproduces the information from Poole's article. It may be noted here that Hill's record of Milton's retort to the question on his blindness demonstrates the spuriousness of the later forms of the anecdote, tentatively accepted in French 4: 391, Parker 1092n55, and elsewhere.

² Poole cautiously dates Hill's entry to "presumably within the same decades" as the correspondence of John Evelyn and John Beale ("Two Early Readers" 76), which also contains references to Milton. The earliest of Beale's letters to Evelyn, in British Library Add MS 78312 fols. 1r-4v, dates from 28 Sept. 1659; the latest, in Add MS 78683 fols. 60v-61v, from 26 June 1682. "Logic. 132" is misinterpreted as referring to a passage in Book 1, Chapter 32, of *The Art of Logic* (90). A slight error in the reading of the biblical reference, "12" for "17," leaves Poole unable to connect the verse to the subject of Milton's alleged Socinianism.

³ Poole cites Leslie's comments as stating "Exactly the same criticism" as Hill's ("Two Early Readers" 92), without realizing the latter's derivation from the former.

⁴ See Leslie, *History* esp. sig. F2v: "I have Endeavour'd to Trace this *Pride* from its first *Rise* in *Heaven*; and shewn its *Progress* upon *Earth*; and that it is the *Mother* and *Nurse* of all the *Heresies* in the *Church* . . ."

⁵ Cf. Leslie, *History* sig. D1r: "It is said indeed in Scripture that the *Devils* knew Him, but not that they knew Him to be *God*. They call'd Him the *Son* of *God*; and the *Holy one* of *God*, and they adjur'd Him by *God* . . ."

⁶ Perhaps Hill confused the *History* with one of the three works by Leslie titled *A Discourse* published around the same time, namely in 1697, 1698, and 1700; the latter two bear the same title, yet the 1700 publication contains five additional works (although not the *History*), continuously paginated but with separate title pages. A sermon by Leslie was published under his name in a joint publication of 1702 (Leslie and Dodwell), but subsequent works of the mid-1700s are still anonymous. Apparently it was the 1708 pamphlet by Thomas Emlyn, entitled *Remarks on Mr. Cha. Leslie's First Dialogue on the Socinian Controversy*, that outed Leslie as the author of his more controversial works, and his authorship is regularly acknowledged in his subsequent publications, beginning with his reply to Emlyn (*Mr. Leslie's Answer*). Elsewhere, Hill refers, by name, to Leslie's *Supplement*: "*Lesly*. Clendon of Person. pref." (Sloane MS 2897 fol. 65v).

⁷ I quote from the King James Version of 1611.

⁸ See Socinus et al. sig. C1v: "Q. *Who is this one divine person?* / A. That one God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. / Q. *How prove you that?* / A. By the most evident testimonies of the Scripture, thus Christ himself, *Iohn* 17. 3. saith, *This is life eternall that they may know thee (Father) the onely true God.*" Cf. Wallis esp. sig. F1r: "The first and great *Objection* of the *Socinians*, from this place, against the *Divinity of Christ*, and the Doctrine of the *Trinity*, is this; If the *Father* be the *onely true God*; then the *Son*, or *Holy-Ghost*, is *not God*, or *not the True God*; but *the Father onely.*"

⁹ The earliest modern reference to the work's theological subtext that I have been able to find is, ironically, by Thomas Burgess, who attempts to use it as proof *against* Milton's Arianism (Milton, *Protestant Union* xviii-xxii).

¹⁰ On Hill and Lodwick, see Poole, "Milton and Science" 20-23; and Henderson and Poole passim. Henderson and Poole describe Lodwick's position as categorically anti-Trinitarian (43), yet some of his most explicit passages on the subject stop short of a definitive statement: "in holy writ we haue no positue description of the Generation of our Lord Christ as God and therefore silence in this matter would best becom us" (189-90); "the doctrine of the Trinity ... is an Article so much beyond the capacity of humane reason that the ablest diuines cannot giue a naturall reason thereof nor a plain positue place of holy writ to proue the same, and therefore a distinction would be made between such positions as are fit for

yong learners and such as are for the greater proficientes and to admit each to that which best befits his capacity” (194). Hill served as comptroller for Tillotson from his appointment as Archbishop of Canterbury in 1691 to his death in 1694, and Tillotson is reported as “often expressing the pleasure he took in Mr. Hill’s conversation, and would frequently term him, his learned friend, and his instructing philosopher” (Hill et al. x). Even if he did not know the identity of their author, Hill must have been familiar with Leslie’s anti-Socinian writings of the period, notably the 1695 *Charge of Socinianism against Dr. Tillotson Considered*, and topics relating to these controversies crop up frequently in his notebooks. On Leslie’s attack on Tillotson, see Kolbrener.

¹¹ Cambridge University Library, classmark SSS. 32. 40, sig. S1r; the copy is of the sixth “issue” of the first edition, according to the classification in Shawcross and Lieb’s edition of the ten-book *Paradise Lost* (392-94). Raymond mentions no earlier discussions of this comment, and I have been unable to find any. The right side of the page has been trimmed for binding, resulting in a loss of a few letters in most lines of the entry, but the general sense is clear. A possible reconstruction might be: “this account of X^{ts} birth seems to border on prophaneness & destroy his coæternity.”

¹² Of the remaining marginalia, there are four corrections based on the “Errata” (at 1.25, 409; 10.575, 598), and a curious suggestion of an alternative reading, appearing on the same page as the Tasso entry. Here, in line 1.91, “In” is underlined (but not crossed out, as with the corrections), with “And” written next to it, presumably as an alternative reading. The same unnecessary emendation is proposed by Bentley in his *Emendations* and edition of *Paradise Lost*, and as it seems improbable that it would have occurred independently to another reader, it could be that at least this entry post-dates Bentley’s publications (or is perhaps of a slightly earlier date, if the author was among those to whom Bentley is said to have showed his work before publication; see Harper 71-74). The only potential indication of the author(s) of any of these entries appears on the title page, which is inscribed “Char[les] Blount,” presumably the deist who adapted Milton’s *Areopagitica*. This Charles Blount cannot, however, be the author of any of the three substantial entries, as he died in 1693, and was also unsympathetic to Trinitarian orthodoxy.

¹³ The *Hirelings* extracts correspond to the following passages in Milton’s work: “a council at *Antioch*, in the year 340, sufferd not either priest or bishop to live on church-maintenance

without necessitie ...”; “about the year 359, *Constantius* the emperor having summond a general councel of bishops to *Ariminum* in *Italie*, and provided for thir subsistence there, the *British* and *French* bishops judging it not decent to live on the publick, chose rather to be at thir own charges. Three only out of *Britain* constrained through want, yet refusing offerd subsistance from the rest, accepted the emperor's provision; ... in w[hich] regard this relater *Sulpitius Severus*, a good author of the same time, highly praises them” (Milton, *Considerations* sig. F10r-11r). The reference to *Moscovia* points to the account of Boris Godunov rebaptized on his deathbed: “Before his death, though it were speedy, he would be shorn, and new christn’d” (Milton, *Brief History* sig. E3r). Here and in the following note I quote from the editions used by Hill, as determinable by his page references.

¹⁴ The extract from *Civil Power* corresponds to the following passage: “deliverd up ... from the fould of Christ and kingdom of grace to the world again which is the kingdom of Satan ...” (Milton, *Treatise* sig. D8v-9r). The reference to the *First Defence* relates generally to the work’s preface (“Milt cont Salm pref”), while that to *The History of Britain* relates to the chapter on King Harold Harefoot, specifically to the tradition of his illegitimacy: “*Harold* for his swiftness surnam’d *Harefoot*, the Son of *Canute* by *Algiva* of *Northampton* (though some speak doubtfully as if she bore him not, but had him of a Shoo-makers Wife, as *Swane* before of a Priest; others of a Maid-Servant, to conceal her barrenness) ...” (Milton, *History* sig. Nn1r).

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